

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 ~ Luke 4:21-30
Boundless Love
January 30, 2022 ~ 4th Sunday after Epiphany
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Introduction:

Today's gospel reading picks up right where we left off last Sunday. Our first verse (21) is Jesus' pivotal one sentence sermon. But today, we continue the story of what happened next. What happened *after* church, (so to speak)? Here at FPC, we might call it Jesus' "Forum for All" sermon talk back, where he explained more fully with examples, how he planned to go about fulfilling his prophetic mandate to bring good news to the poor...to let the oppressed go free. You will see his application of Isaiah's prophecy was *not* what they expected to hear.

They expected their long-awaited Messiah to defeat the oppressive and occupying foreign power of the Roman Empire. They hoped their Messiah would be a political and military leader who would take on the power of Rome. And they were ready to lead the charge. So, when they heard something completely different come out of Jesus' mouth, they reacted swiftly and violently. The gap between their expectations and what Jesus was saying, infuriated them.

Notice how quickly this adoring crowd turns on their hometown hero. It can take your breath away. This story happens right after Jesus' first sermon, and signals a thread that will weave itself throughout Jesus' days on earth. His words and his actions would continue to offend both his followers *and* his critics. And the gap between their expectations and the reality of the Messiah that Jesus actually was, persisted. In Luke, this gap is another golden thread that winds its way throughout the gospel all the way to his final chapter, Luke 24. We hear it in the words of Cleopas walking on the road to Emmaus, when he says sadly to the recently Risen Christ, mistakenly thinking he is talking to a stranger, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." (Luke 24:21.)

What are your hopes; what are your expectations, right now as we prepare to hear God's Holy Word? Whatever they may be, get ready to be surprised. Gospel truth can do that, to us.

Sermon:

Katie Hines-Shah, a Lutheran pastor in Illinois, tells the story about when she asked her six-year-old daughter what she learned in Sunday School that day. Apparently, she put down her fork, turned to her mom, and in a very serious tone said, "We learned that Jesus was not a Lutheran!" Katie proceeded, as any modern parent does these days, and posted it on Facebook. Then came the comments, "Of course not, Jesus was a Presbyterian..." "Next they will be telling her he wasn't even a Christian," quipped another.¹

Of course, we *know* the truth is, that Jesus was neither a Lutheran or a Presbyterian or a Christian. In fact, he was a dark-skinned Middle Eastern Jew. And yet, still we imagine, that he was like us, right? That's how Jesus can become, say, a light-skinned, blue-eyed Christian American who votes the way we do, or at least roots for our favorite football team... Surely Jesus

shared our Green Bay Packer upset, last Saturday night. How could he *possibly* have been rooting for the 49ers? This kind of thinking about Jesus, as “our Jesus” or “our guy” is not new. Today’s story in Luke, here on the 4th Sunday after Epiphany reveals that this proprietary thinking about Jesus has been in play since his very first sermon in his hometown synagogue, in Nazareth. “Yup, that’s *our* boy. You know, Joseph’s son.”

Jesus would have none of that. It seems that his takeaway message almost prevented him from ever preaching another sermon. Jesus’ “offend everyone” approach to preaching can be hazardous to one’s health. But what exactly made them so mad? Was he not simply telling them the truth about the breadth and the depth of God’s love that knows no bounds? Ironically, his homies were largely common folks of Nazareth. Most of them were poor and suffered under the power of the empire. Perhaps they had high hopes that their fortunes would turn with “their Jesus” leading the charge. They could hitch their wagon to his star and become the elite, the first string, the privileged, the favored ones. At last. It’s about time.

But instead, Jesus cites two familiar examples from their scriptures of how extremely wide God’s mercy extended. [From 1 Kings 17:8-24 (Elijah) and 2 Kings 5:1-19 (Elisha).] They are both situations of poverty and desperation. In them, the prophets, Elijah and Elisha are agents of divine transformation. Both stories locate the recipients among the poor and the outsiders: an unnamed, food-insecure widow in Zarephath in Sidon, a Gentile. Sidon was just the sort of foreign power that insiders loved to hate. And secondly, the named male, Naaman, was a Syrian/Gentile and a leper. Naaman was not only a foreigner, but the commander of an enemy army. Jesus used these two stories, well known to his audience in the synagogue that day, to show them from their own faith story: the favor of God extends to the poor and the oppressed of *every* nation. And Jesus wanted them to be under no false illusions: he had come to earth to continue God’s work of healing all the wrong people.

What’s changed in 2000 years? The takeaway message that still offends and upends us today is this jarring shift from what we want “our Jesus” to be for us and people like us, and what kind of people Christ wants us to be. Paul spells it out in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. God’s boundless mercy and love connects us all equally. No favoritism, no hierarchy in the realm of God’s kingdom. What’s so hard about that? As Nadia Bolz-Weber, (ELCA pastor, preacher, writer) answers this question clearly. She writes, “Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it.” The truth is: Jesus and Jesus’ love cannot be contained. Not within the container of a given religion, point of view, not even within the limitations of any spoken language.

The truth about us is, let’s face it: we all draw the line somewhere. Who is in our tribe and who is not? So many lines, so little time. We know that tribalism within our country at present is rampant. Recently David Leonhardt, writer for the New York Times, wrote a piece titled, “Two Covid Americas.” He pointed out that even though we know a virus is not partisan, as a country we have managed to draw a line down the middle of it. From his analysis of a comprehensive national poll, he wrote, “Millions of Republican voters have decided that downplaying Covid is core to their identity as conservatives... Millions of democrats have decided that organizing their

lives around Covid is core to their identity as progressives.ⁱⁱⁱ Wherever we may place ourselves along this political spectrum, here we are together, and it's a beautiful thing. Jesus does not expect or want us all to agree. Nor does Jesus want or expect us all to be the same. Far from it. Here we learn to see Christ in the other. Here we learn how to get along in the very midst of our differences. Together we sit, poised for a word of truth from the one who is Divine Love, calling to us from the other side of whatever line we have drawn.

Although we all draw lines, Jesus is here to lead us and show the still more excellent way. We ran right up into this challenge last Thursday night, where even on Zoom we could feel the tension rise. There were about 18 of us on the call, representing at least seven different faith communities across Marshfield, including three of us from FPC. We are part of a newly forming group of folks who share the vision of resettling Afghan evacuee families here in Marshfield, perhaps five (or more). The air became tense when we raised the difficult, but important concern, if we helped to resettle several Afghan families here in Marshfield, how would they be received—in the store, on the street, in schools, in local jobs. Among the eighteen of us were two who had immigrated as individuals who came to Marshfield with particular jobs and skills already established. And they were courageous enough to share the challenges they faced in feeling welcomed here.

Everyone on the call agreed that this issue was real, but not a reason to pull the plug on this project. Rather, it may be one of the many reasons we are being called to reach out to these families for whom we could offer a new place to call home and they could help grow us to become a more welcoming community. For us at FPC, I hear in this project, Jesus calling us to grow right in our ability to embody his boundless love. We aspire to be welcoming, as Jesus would be. As much as we aspire to this goal: Doing it will not be easy. Nor will it be comfortable. But that was not Jesus' mission. He told us that in Luke 4 and Paul preaches about it to the church in Corinth. Our bottom line as Christ followers is simply this: ***Does it square with Love?*** That is the question that Paul would have us ask.

When we take off our shoes at the water's edge and touch our toes in the waters of Christ's boundless love, we are dipping into the baptismal waters of the new creation. Big beautiful words, but how does that work in our day to day lives? As Nadia Bolz-Weber has written, *"New doesn't always look perfect. Like the Easter story itself, new is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don't actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to not mention when I'm right. New looks like every fresh start and every act of forgiveness and every moment of letting go of what we thought we couldn't live without and then somehow living without it anyways. New is the thing we never saw coming—never even hoped for—but ends up being what we needed all along."*ⁱⁱⁱⁱ That's what Christ's boundless love looks like. The thing we thought was beyond the line of what we could say or do, becomes sayable and doable.

No, Jesus is not a Presbyterian, a Lutheran, or a Christian. He's not "our Jesus." Nor can we ever "get Jesus" completely. But here's the good news: Jesus gets us! Jesus gets each of us

with all our differences, completely! And Jesus expects us to figure out how to live like we all belong. That's what God created us to do. Not later, not some day when we get our stuff together. No, my friends, all we have is now. "Today, the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." It depends on us hearing what Jesus the prophet is telling us. So right now, let us imagine *our* part in this wild new creation, where everyone belongs. Yes, the vision Jesus spelled out so clearly that it enraged Jesus' hometown crowd: God's new creation of boundless love is anywhere everyone is welcome because belonging this new kind of belonging is based on the deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions.

Let's expand our imaginations and hearts into this vision by saying together right now, "A Litany of Belonging" written by Richard Rohr, American Franciscan priest and spiritual writer.

A Litany of Belonging

- *People of African descent, of Asian descent, of European descent, of First Nations descent in this land and abroad, and people of mixed and multiple descents and of all the languages spoken here. Together we say, "I belong."*
- *People on all parts of the continuum of gender identity and expression, including those who are gay, bisexual, heterosexual, transgender, cisgender, queer folks, the sexually active, the celibate, and everyone for whom those labels don't apply (or aren't quite sure of what they mean). Together we say, "I belong."*
- *Bodies with all abilities and challenges. Those living with any chronic medical condition, visible or invisible, mental, or physical. Together we say, "I belong."*
- *People who identify as activists and those who don't. Mystics, believers, seekers of all kinds. People of all ages. Those who support you to be here. Together we say, "I belong."*
- *Your emotions: joy, fear, grief, contentment, disappointment, surprise, and whatever else flows through you. Together we say, "I belong."*
- *Your families, genetic and otherwise. Those dear to us who have died. Our ancestors and the future ones. The ancestors who lived in this land, in this place, where this building is now... we honor you through this work that we are undertaking. Together we say, "I belong."*
- *People who feel broken, lost, struggling; who suffer from self-doubt and self-judgment. Together we say, "I belong."*
- *All beings that inhabit this earth: the two-legged, the four-legged, winged, and finned, those that walk, fly, and drawl, above the ground and below, in air and water. Together we say, "I belong."^{iv}*

Amen.

ⁱ Katie Hines-Shah, "Reflections on the Lectionary", *Christian Century*, January 12, 2022, p.23

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/briefing/covid-behavior-vaccinated-unvaccinated.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, (Jericho Books: New York, NY, 2013), p.174.

^{iv} "A Litany of Belonging," Week Four Practice 2022, Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation: Daily Meditations, adapted from *Diversity Welcome, Training for change*.